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ABSTRACT

Despite the stereotype of today's undergraduates as having an inadequate literacy level, a teacher of English at a large midwestern university was surprised to find that students' literacy autobiographies reflect what might be called a conventional literacy success story, one that represents a strain of American autobiography dating back to Benjamin Franklin. Language and education have typically been seen in this country as a means to occupational, social, and political success and power. Writing and reading literacy autobiographies is a useful assignment because it helps students connect college with previous learning, can reignite the previous joy of writing and reading, and promotes a broader concept of literacy. However, the connection between literacy achievement and the success of the American Dream produces an ambivalent reaction for some teachers, since it subordinates literacy to other aims. The students in an introductory composition course at the University of Wisconsin were asked to write literacy autobiographies, and most of them narrated some literacy successes, often before schooling began. During their school years, however, students began to view reading and writing as required and less joyful enterprises. Overcoming fear is often associated with attaining success in literacy activities. In cases where attaining literacy involves great struggle, the success motif can be moving and inspirational. The downside of this outlook is the possibility that students will see literacy only in terms of a chore, and not in terms of play, adventure, and creativity. In a society that values success leading to the American Dream, teachers should try to instill in students other views of literacy focused on play, language and joy. (HB)

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MEMORIES OF PLAY, DREAMS OF SUCCESS: LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF 101 STUDENTS

Mike Rose has written of underprepared first-year college students that "they are literate people straining at the boundaries of their ability." One of my first-year composition students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison put it a bit differently: "I'm not illiterate just because I don't like to read novels." I hear a note of justifiable defensiveness in that remark. Generally, my students accept rather patiently the constant accusations levelled at their generation for its illiteracy; perhaps they find such accusations consistent with their individual histories of being categorized, if not as illiterate, at least as inadequately literate. Many of these students readily grant that they haven't made reading and writing priorities in their lives and that they stand in need of improvement in those areas. When they are placed in a writing course because of placement test scores, many of them see this placement as confirming previous diagnoses of their writing as weak or below par--though some express surprise or resentment.

And so it surprised me to discover that these students' literacy autobiographies reflect what I call the conventional literacy success story. This convention represents a strain in American autobiography going back to Benjamin Franklin and is especially notable in African-American and immigrant autobiographies--I think of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, Richard Wright, Mary Antin, Abraham Cahan, and Maya Angelou. Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger for Memory* and Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* not only follow in this tradition but in fact can be seen as belonging to the sub-genre of literacy autobiography. Language and education have been seen in this country as a means to occupational, social, and political success and power. That literacy is seen as part of American identity can be inferred from the literacy requirements in applying for citizenship and even in the notorious "literacy tests" administered in the South. Those tests also demonstrate the potential of literacy, as defined by those in power, to be used as a means of exclusion.

I'm not yet sure, then, whether students' casting their histories of literacy development in terms of success is cause for celebration or concern. Certainly one of my goals in assigning the literacy autobiography

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was to help students recognize and build on the literacy they brought to the course. Writing and reading literacy autobiographies can help students and teachers connect college literacy activities and students' previous literacy experiences, and also connect academic communities with other communities students belong to. Writing and sharing literacy autobiographies, in which basic writers often lament the loss of a playful, intimate pre-school literacy, can encourage students and teachers to recover a sense of writing as a joyful activity worth doing for its own sake. Also, students and teachers develop a broader concept of literacy from these autobiographies, which go beyond school-based literacy learning to include literacy histories of family members and even ancestors; accounts of family and peer uses of written and oral language; the influence of literacy technologies, such as typewriters, computers, and libraries; and even students' experiences with other forms of "language" and "text," such as mathematics, music, or art.

But what of the connection between literacy success stories and the notion of success that feeds the myth of the American Dream? I'm not entirely comfortable with success, in school or the business and professional world, as the primary motivation for attaining advanced literacy. Too often, composition courses have been seen as giving students the reading and writing skills needed to succeed in future courses and careers. It's one thing to connect an introductory writing course to the larger academic community and even to students' future lives, but it's another to subordinate literacy to "more important" activities or to an unexamined ambition for success.

My ambivalence about the success convention emerged almost a year after I had first noticed that motif, so I'm not yet sure how to resolve it, and I don't want to let that ambivalence overshadow the value and interest of these literacy autobiographies. Before venturing any further conclusions, I should first examine the ways students employ this success motif in their papers. I suggested in the opening paragraph that these literacy success stories were written in a context determined by failure--previous unhappy experiences with reading and writing and placement in English 101, a freshman composition course required only of students scoring in the lowest eight to ten per cent on the English placement test[1]. One student expresses this paradox well: "I always

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[1]Other freshmen at the University of Wisconsin-Madison are not required to take first-year composition, though a writing elective is offered to freshmen in the College of Arts and Science. Many of the faculty, including composition instructors, would prefer that a wider range of students take a first-year writing course.

thought writing came naturally to me. It remains clear now that it doesn't come naturally; why else would I be in English 101?"

Even though most of the students declare unequivocally that writing--and in many cases reading as well--did *not* come naturally to them, they do narrate literacy achievements. Many of them have positive memories of preschool literacy: being read to by mothers and sometimes fathers, cherishing picture books like *Where the Wild Things Are* and Dr. Seuss, and making frequent pilgrimages to the awe-inspiring public library. Christy[2] recalls walking with her mother to the Minneapolis Public Library:

> I remember passing through the tall, glass doors and once inside, the smell of paper, ink and floor wax combined. My mom would hold my hand while we descended the shiny, grey stairs that lead to the children's section of the library. . . . The times spent between my mom and I when I was a child and even now are very sacred and I wouldn't exchange them for the world.

Christy also recalls more infrequent but equally special moments when her father would read bedtime stories to her and her sister: "I'll never forget how close I felt to my dad when he was reading to the two of us. I could tell that he was enjoying himself reading the poems to us just as much as we enjoyed hearing them." Andrew also recalls trips to the public library with his mother: "My favorite thing to do was to sit in the big sofa seats placed in the window well, grab my all-time favorite, *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, kick back and read the whole book." These students and many others recall the pre-school years as a time when they approached books and written language as a playful realm of adventure. The intimate involvement between adults and children that books mediated surely accounts for the warmth of these literacy memories.

During the school years, however, students recall that reading and then writing became required activities that took place in far less intimate and playful settings. As Rodriguez characterizes schooling, it entails moving from the private to the public sphere of identity. Rodriguez' own early experiences in school also involved fear--the fear of leaving the security of home and his family's language, Spanish. But Rodriguez

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[2] I have changed students' names to guard their privacy; I did obtain permission from students to use their autobiographies for research.

insists that this transition, this loss, is not unique to bilingual children, and my students' autobiographies bear him out. Here's how Natalie begins her autobiography:

> The crispness of my new red dress with the yellow duck on the front added to the excitement of my first day of kindergarten. My mom was prepared with her camera to take many photos of me. The time came when the bus arrived and my mom walked me to the bus. As I walked down the aisle of the bus I saw all these new faces which was intimidating and scary for me. As I look back on my first day of kindergarten, I realize that was the beginning of my formal introduction to the English language.

Natalie goes on to relate the excitement of learning to read in first grade, so obviously fear did not overshadow all her literacy experiences. But notice how she describes being introduced to the school library: "At first, I though the library was a scary place, because I felt claustrophobic from all the books." Later she recalls being embarrassed at having to read stories aloud to her fifth grade class. Interestingly, another student remembers that reading aloud in fifth grade made her so nervous that she stuttered, though in high school she joined the forensics team and made a graduation speech.

Rodriguez may be right: the fear and trembling associated with schooling may be necessary accompaniments to the crucial process of forming a public identity and learning to write as a public person. And like Rodriguez, though not in as dramatic a fashion, my 101 students by and large recall overcoming fear, embarrassment, boredom, apathy--and sometimes the special difficulties associated with ESL and learning disabilities--and becoming literate. Sooner or later, in varying degrees, they achieved competency in handling the written word as such competency is measured in schools. Most of these writers characterize their literacy history with terms like development, progression, struggle, growth, evolution, or emergence. After all, they have entered a prestigious state university, the flagship school in the Wisconsin higher education system. One student concludes his autobiography this way: "It would be scary to see where I'd be now if I hadn't done well academically. Perhaps not here at the UW-Madison."

In some ways, then, it's not surprising that these students frame their literacy autobiographies in terms of success. Their literacy achievement has helped them earn admission into a major university; they can look forward to one day possessing a college degree that will confer a certain privileged status and enable them to

enter the business or professional world with concomitant economic and social rewards. Many of them come from middle-class families, but a few are the first in their family to go to college, and they stress the upward mobility made possible by literacy education. Rhonda, for example, grew up on a farm that had been in the family 100 years; her mother married instead of going to college as she had planned. Two of Rhonda's great aunts had attended UW and become elementary school teachers, so Rhonda was in a sense reinstituting a family tradition of higher education. Jim's farming parents and most of his relatives only had high school educations, and he says that he grew up speaking "barn talk" rather than the language needed to succeed in the business world. Jenny's grandmother was a farmer's wife who hadn't even finished high school, but later realized times were changing and so encouraged her children to get more education for "success." Jenny's parents divorced when she was two, however, so her mother had no chance to further her education until her second marriage, when she and her new husband decided to return to college. The resulting promotions and pay raises made Jenny realize the importance of college for "greater standing" at work and in the community. Other students whose parents immigrated to the United States were not necessarily the first in their family to attain higher education, but they obviously attained fluency in English more quickly and easily than their parents and, like Rodriguez, saw that literacy was a form of cultural currency.

Particularly in cases where attaining literacy involves struggling against great odds--racial and ethnic discrimination, gender role expectations, poverty, learning disabilities, broken homes, or hard-pressed rural and working-class backgrounds--the literacy success motif can be moving and inspirational. It's hard not to applaud and affirm the pride revealed in such life stories. And having students write literacy autobiographies offers them a chance to express this pride, and in some cases to discover it. "Never before have I evaluated the impact of my past reading and writing experiences," concludes one student. A number of students resolve to improve their reading and writing abilities, sometimes in specific ways. One student declares his intention to read novels during the next summer vacation; others simply note that the increased amount of reading and writing required in college will push them to improve in those areas.

I certainly cannot discount or deride these influences and motivations to attain higher levels of literacy. But I see a downside, too. With the emphasis on school and career success as motivation for attaining advanced

literacy, what becomes of literacy as play and adventure? or of literacy as oppositional, enabling a person to question cultural norms? For many of these students, sports and other peer group social activities became the preferred form of play during the elementary school years. Reading and writing became work--a chore. The words "enjoyment," "pleasure," and "creativity" appear in connection with school-based literacy all too infrequently. Often, students recall one teacher, one course, or one assignment that momentarily piqued their interest in reading and/or writing--an interest and personal involvement usually not sustained by other teachers and assignments.

Some students mention a senior-year teacher who made reading and writing enjoyable, challenging, and meaningful. Would college sustain that renewed sense of joy in literacy activities? What would English 101, another required literacy activity, do to nourish that new motivation? What if that motivation translates into a desire or obligation to succeed? What kind of literacy will *success* encourage and support?

My 101 students, like many others, began reading Richard Rodriguez while they were working on their literacy autobiographies, and I wonder about the influence of *Hunger of Memory* on their self-presentation. Comments gleaned from student summaries of Rodriguez' views on literacy suggest the possible nature of this influence. Alan wrote, "I think Rodriguez felt it was important to be accepted by everyone. He felt that if he was well-educated this would result in acceptance. . . . To be well-educated in the U.S. to me is part of the 'American Dream.'" Andrew also saw Rodriguez becoming literate in English "due to his desire to be a normal 'public' person." And Trahn, a Laotian-American student, summarized Rodriguez as saying that "to become a successful reader and writer in America is to think like an American." For adolescents entering college, what could be more important than the desire to be a "normal public person"? To be "accepted"? To join the community of the "educated" and the "successful"? And note that *educated* is a past participle, a description of an attained status, not necessarily an ongoing activity.

Some students did not Rodriguez' ambivalence toward his English literacy and his educational and socioeconomic success. (Of course, I had nothing to do with their perceptions!) Matthew noted that Rodriguez' joining the community of the educated was "a mixed blessing to him because it was hard to give up his old life, family, and culture. This new community was a lonely one to him because his family was not involved in it, so

he was virtually by himself." And Christy insightfully commented on Rodriguez' cover photo, which showed "a man with a private, bitter expression on his face [fitting] the tone of the whole autobiography." Few if any of my students had experienced the kind of disjunctures Rodriguez had. Still, I think in their own ways private and public identities had clashed, and the public literacy success they had attained represented a certain loss of family intimacy, a kind of loneliness in the crowd.

Books and writing need not involve a complete loss of intimacy or playfulness, of course. Several students tell of learning to enjoy reading for pleasure, especially horror stories, mysteries, and sports books, and many tell of mothers who read for pleasure, though they often note, almost apologetically, that their mothers read romance novels. I think students often distinguish such pleasure reading from school reading, even when school reading involves novels. Other students speak of singing as a means of self-expression involving words that they enjoy and feel confident about,[3] and some students even connect their athletic activities with literacy and self-expression. I think these students want to find areas in their lives where they use words skillfully and effectively; they want to portray themselves as competent and successful, as "literate." And perhaps they sense in some way the need to reconnect literacy and intimacy, language and play, words and joy.

Some writers have suggested that our educational system and our society favor reading over writing because reading is a more passive and socially useful skill. Reading and limited forms of writing can be valuable on the job. More advanced writing is an active, creative use of language and thus potentially oppositional. And so in a society that values success and that applauds the kind of initiative that leads to fulfillment of the American Dream but does not challenge the premises of that Dream, I wonder whether success can in some ways spoil literacy. I want my students and their teachers to recognize their literacy histories and see themselves as literate people entering a new community that requires extensions and new applications of that literacy. But do I want them to conform their literacy histories to school and society-driven notions of success? Or if such conformity will usually be a given, dare I encourage them to challenge the very standards of success by which they have been judged and motivated? How can I help them regain the playful

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[3]It's interesting that Rodriguez speaks of singing as the "public occasion of sound" that most reminds him of intimacy in his life.

literacy of preschool years, the intimate literacy of journals, letters, and bedtime stories? I suppose I want more of my students to come full circle in their literacy autobiographies, much as Jim, the student from a farm family, did. Jim began his autobiography with a dream he had of being a character in *Where the Wild Things Are*. He concluded the paper by saying that when he awoke from the dream, he had to reread the book. I want that kind of dreaming to be part of my students' American Dream.

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